

## BACKGROUND

This project examines representations of interracial relationships in the 2005 film *Crash* in an effort to expose instances of essentialism. It works to identify racial discourses, which advance essentialized representations of marginalized racial groups. It challenges the film's status as a social commentary on race, focusing on the ways in which its mediated re/presentations of race further perpetuate hegemonic discourses on race that the film sets out to challenge. It hopes to explicate the ways in which representations of race in *Crash* work to fix social perceptions of race and interracial relationships.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative content analysis methodology was used to analyze the film. The film was examined and then the theories of Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, and bell hooks were applied to specific scenes. This project then incorporated the reviews of prominent media personalities and film critics to further examine the phenomenon of essentialism in and surrounding the film.

### AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

This project also deploys a qualitative research method called *autoethnography* that allows researchers to incorporate their own experiences and observations into their research – to position the researcher as an consumer of the film who is also involved in real-life interracial relationships.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### ESSENTIALISM

Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall defines *essentialism* as the assumption that individuals possess certain characteristics based solely on their membership to a particular group.

### REALITY VERSUS ACTUALITY OF RACE

Hall argues that while all individuals share in a common *reality* of race, individual opinions and experiences create unique *actualities* of race. Therefore, no representation can be *accurate* because there can be no standard.

### RE/PRESENTATION VERSUS REPRESENTATION

*Re/presentation*, according to Hall, refers to the process of standing in for a particular depicted person or situation. *Representation*, refers to the process of assigning a meaning or value to a depicted person or situation.

### SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGE

Michel Foucault used this term to refer to marginalized groups whose histories have been buried in a functionalist social hierarchy. Members of these groups have had fewer opportunities for representation than have members of dominant groups. The researcher uses the term to refer to her position as a member of a traditionally subjugated group.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The McNair Scholars Program of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale  
The Department of Speech Communication  
Photos courtesy of AllMoviePhotos.com and crashfilm.com



*Crash* contributes to the *sexualization of race* by representing interracial relationships as overtly and exclusively sexual in nature. *Left*: Christine Thayer (Thandie Newton) clings to Officer John Ryan (Matt Dillon) following her rescue from a burning car. *Right*: Ria (Jennifer Esposito) walks with her romantic and career partner, Graham (Don Cheadle), following a sexual encounter.



The film relies on common stereotypes to shape its characters. It features a young black man as a criminal, a Korean woman as a bad driver, and a Middle-Eastern man as violent. *Left*: Anthony (Chris "Ludacris" Bridges) stands in a chop shop after stealing a car. *Right*: Farhad (Shaun Toub) argues with the owner of a gun shop after being denied the right to purchase a gun.



*Crash* offers only a few characters who resist common stereotypes. *Left*: Daniel (Michael Peña), a young Hispanic locksmith, resists the stereotypes that others place upon him. The film garnered critical responses from prominent members of the media, including Oprah Winfrey. *Right*: The cast of *Crash* talks with Winfrey following the release of the film and its unexpected rise to fame.

## CRASH IN THE MEDIA

*Crash* garnered critical responses from media and film critics, some of whom praised the movie and some who condemned it. Regardless of their stances, these critics debated the *accuracy* of the film's representations of race and interracial relationships. Hall states that because no two individuals experience race in exactly the same way, there can exist no standard representation against which individuals may compare their experiences. This project incorporates critical responses to demonstrate the presence of the film in society and to highlight the controversy its representations have engendered.

## ASSERTIONS

Analysis revealed that the film contributes to the essentialism of race and interracial relationships in four main ways:

- Participates in the *sexualization of race*
- Continues the trend of the *anti-racist white hero film*
- Relies on common stereotypes to shape its characters
- Does not incorporate socio-historical background

### SEXUALIZATION OF RACE

hooks defines the sexualization of race as the depiction of minority characters as overtly sexual in nature, with men as sexual predators and women as sexual objects or victims.

- *Crash* positions its female minority characters as the sexual conquests of their male counterparts; occurs in the relationships between Christine Thayer and John Ryan, Rick Cabot and his assistant, Karen, and between Graham Waters and his partner, Ria.

### ANTI-RACIST WHITE HERO FILM

Kelly J. Madison uses this term to refer to films that privilege the perspectives of their white characters over the perspectives of minority characters; demonstrates the system of privileging media representations.

- This phenomenon is embodied in *Crash* by John Ryan, a white character who undergoes a dramatic personal transformation despite his overt racist tendencies throughout the film.

### USE OF COMMON STEREOTYPES

*Crash* suggests that racism exists everywhere and in everyone, yet creates characters that embody common stereotypes. Hall's notion of the *diversification of images* argues that when the media offers a wider range of minority representations, stereotyping is less likely to occur.

- *Crash* represents young black men and a Middle-Eastern man as violent, a middle-aged white man as ignorant and racist, and most minority women as subservient.

### ABSENCE OF SOCIO-HISTORIC BACKGROUND

The film ignores the causes and origins of its characters' racist attitudes and behaviors, placing them on a deceptively level playing field of privilege and power. Hall argues that individuals' experiences shape their unique perceptions, or *actualities* of race.

## REFERENCES

- "A *Crash* Cast Moment." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. ABC, Chicago. 6 October 2005. [Crash](#). Dir. Paul Haggis. Perf. Matt Dillon, Don Cheadle, Sandra Bullock, Brendan Fraser, Thandie Newton. Lions Gate Entertainment, 2005. Ebert, Roger. "Crash: When Racial Worlds Collide." [Roger Ebert at the Chicago Sun-Times](#). 5 May 2006. Foucault, Michel. "Two Lectures." [Culture/power/history: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory](#). Ed. Nicholas B. Dirks. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994. hooks, bell and Gilda L. Sheppard. "Talking Trash: A Dialogue about *Crash*." [allaboutbell.com](#). Madison, Kelly J. "Legitimation Crisis and Containment: The 'Anti-Racist-White-Hero' Film." [Critical Studies in Mass Communication](#). 16.4 (1999): 399-416. Nagel, Joane. [Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality](#). New York: Oxford, 2003. [Race the Floating Signifier](#). Perf. Stuart Hall and Sut Jhally. Media Education Foundation, 1997. [Representation and the Media](#). Perf. Stuart Hall and Sut Jhally. Media Education Foundation, 1997.